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Chairman: Mr. Ashe (Antigua and Barbuda)
Acting Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Saha

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Agenda item 124: Proposed programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007 (*continued*)

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the harmonization of the conditions of travel throughout the United Nations system (A/60/78 and Add.1)

1. **Mr. Gorita** (Chairman of the Joint Inspection Unit), introducing the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the harmonization of the conditions of travel throughout the United Nations system (A/60/78), said that the report contained a comparative analysis of various elements of the travel of officials travelling at the expense of the United Nations. It identified best practices and procedures in the application of travel entitlements in various organizations of the United Nations system and recommended their extension across the whole system.

2. In recent years, the organizations of the United Nations system had adopted a number of new travel policies with a view to improving conditions of travel and adapting to the rapid and drastic changes within the travel industry and their negative impact on the quality of travel. While significant progress had been made in harmonizing travel conditions throughout the system, disparities still existed. Accordingly, the report contained two sets of recommendations. The first was designed to address the disparities and covered the need to review the criteria used to determine the class of travel of staff members, the percentage of the cash amount paid under the lump sum option, the number of hours allowed for stopovers and the travel of members of United Nations organs and subsidiary organs. The second set of recommendations, which was designed to improve processes, addressed the simplification of procedures for processing travel claims, the reimbursement of travel by private car, the extension of the lump sum option to other categories of travel, the handling of exceptions to the approved class of travel and the use of alternative modes of transportation.

3. Disparities in the class of air travel had increased in recent years. For instance, while the United Nations, its funds and programmes and a number of the specialized agencies granted business class for flights of nine or more hours, some other organizations, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the World Bank, granted a higher class of travel for official business. In addition, some organizations had recently modified their requirements for the granting of business class in response to, inter alia, the health considerations highlighted by WHO. It was clearly necessary to harmonize the applicable rules and system-wide practice in that area and the report therefore recommended a review of the criteria used to determine the class of travel with a view to adopting a common policy at the United Nations system level.

4. The Joint Inspection Unit had been encouraged by the comments and suggestions of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and viewed them as a concrete and constructive contribution to the harmonization and standardization of travel entitlements across the system. Several organizations, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), had already considered the report and had already implemented or were contemplating implementation of a number of its recommendations.

5. **Mr. Herman** (Secretariat of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination), introducing the comments of the Secretary-General, as well as those of CEB, on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on harmonization of the conditions of travel throughout the United Nations system (A/60/78/Add.1), said that the report of the Joint Inspection Unit touched on three important issues, namely, the health and welfare of staff members, harmonizing travel policies and practices throughout the system and enhancing the ability to secure competitive terms for staff travel, and improving cost-effectiveness and the efficient use of travel resources. It presented a comprehensive analysis and a thorough review of current policies and practices, taking into account important changes in the travel industry, medical evidence on the impact of long haul travel and the new security environment. Many of the elements of the report echoed the earlier work done by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC).

6. The report presented persuasive arguments in favour of simplifying and streamlining administrative

procedures. In that connection, senior officials dealing with travel-related matters had set up an inter-agency network for sharing information with a view to identifying possible areas for harmonization and greater cost-effectiveness while addressing staff members' health concerns.

7. In recent years, United Nations system organizations had taken a range of initiatives designed to regulate and manage official travel, but disparities persisted in travel policies and practices, particularly in respect of the class of travel, the lump sum option and the issue of stopovers. Paragraphs 7 and 8 of document A/60/78/Add.1 summarized the position of CEB members on some of those issues.

8. With regard to recommendation 1, CEB members reiterated their support for the proposal to establish a business class threshold of six hours, bearing in mind the deterioration of travel conditions and the established health risks of long haul air travel. However, they were not in favour of creating new categories on the basis of age, taking the view that due weight should be given to medical factors. As far as recommendation 2 was concerned, CEB members noted that the issue of the lump sum option affected different organizations in different ways. In particular, that option may not be possible for some of the smaller organizations of the system.

9. In conclusion, while CEB members supported the general intent and thrust of most of the recommendations, the system-wide application of certain recommendations was not possible, profitable or appropriate. Some of the recommendations related to ongoing work within ICSC or other system organizations, and CEB intended to continue working with the former towards the achievement of the aims and objectives of the Joint Inspection Unit. Those recommendations that fell within the authority of the executive heads, in particular the Secretary-General, would be pursued and implemented as appropriate.

10. **Mr. Saha** (Acting Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions) said that the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) had engaged in extensive discussions with the Joint Inspection Unit and representatives of the Secretary-General on the question at issue. With reference to paragraph 2 of document A/60/78/Add.1, the Advisory Committee was looking forward to the submission by the Secretary-General of a comprehensive plan for the harmonization of travel policies and practices throughout the United Nations system. During its consideration of that plan, the Advisory Committee would take into account the suggestions and recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit.

11. **Ms. Russell** (United Kingdom), speaking on behalf of the European Union; the acceding countries Bulgaria and Romania; the candidate countries Croatia and Turkey; the stabilization and association process countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; and, in addition, Ukraine, said that the report of the Joint Inspection Unit provided a comprehensive analysis of the administration of official travel while highlighting the need for greater streamlining throughout the United Nations system. The European Union intended to discuss the issue in more depth during informal consultations but, at the outset, wished to emphasize that entitlements to first class travel should be strictly limited. The criteria for determining exceptions should be further clarified.

12. **Ms. Shah** (United States of America) reaffirmed her delegation's long-standing interest in the policies of the United Nations governing travel and subsistence entitlements. By taking steps to achieve the efficient use of travel resources, the General Assembly could ensure that the Organization's funds were being channelled towards the highest priority activities. A number of the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit were specific and actionable. Her delegation agreed, in particular, that only heads of organizations should travel first class. However, the issue of subsistence allowances had not been examined in sufficient depth. Delegates representing Member States and certain expert members of United Nations bodies received an additional subsistence allowance of 40 per cent more than the amount granted to senior United Nations officials travelling to the same meetings. As well as giving rise to a disparity that caused resentment among officials, that practice represented a waste of resources that should be employed for higher priorities.

13. **Ms. Udo** (Nigeria) drew attention to paragraph 11 of document A/60/78/Add.1 and stressed the importance of coordinating the activities of ICSC and the Joint Inspection Unit. However, her delegation was in favour of retaining the practice of reporting exceptions to the approved standards of travel.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.